4. The Committee also notes with appreciation the State party's indication of its support for the Committee's work with regard to the draft optional protocol to the Covenant.

C. Factors and difficulties impeding the implementation of the Covenant

5. The Committee notes with concern that there are not sufficient mechanisms to coordinate and ensure uniformity of compliance, at both the federal and regional levels, with the State party's international human rights obligations.

6. The Committee notes that article 23 of the Constitution represents a step forward in that it incorporates a number of economic, social and cultural rights, leaving the guarantee of such rights to statutes and royal decrees. However, such legislation has so far not been adopted. While article 23, read in conjunction with other fundamental rights guarantees of the Belgian Constitution, could be interpreted to be applicable directly in the domestic legal order, such interpretation still depends on the exercise of discretion by the national courts.

D. Principal subjects of concern

7. The Committee regrets that the State party has not established a comprehensive national plan of action for human rights, in accordance with paragraph 71 of the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

8. The Committee also expresses its concern about the lack of an independent national human rights institution, established in accordance with the Paris Principles of 1991, which would serve to monitor the entire range of human rights in the country.

9. The Committee is deeply concerned that there is no specific legislation which outlaws acts of xenophobia and racism, and in particular the activities of right-wing racist political parties, which are increasingly present on the political scene, especially in Flanders.

10. The Committee expresses its concern about the discriminatory effects against women of the so-called "cohabitation rule" in the unemployment insurance regime of Belgium.

11. The Committee is also concerned about the persistent gap between the unemployment rates of men and women and the discrepancy between them with regard to wages.

12. The Committee expresses its concern about the considerable unemployment among young people and the fact that that State party has not sufficiently addressed the long-term unemployment of persons over 45 years of age, nor the situation of those who have been forced into early retirement.

13. The Committee is also concerned about the phenomena of paedophilia, prostitution of children, child pornography and violence against children.

14. In the light of article 28 of the Covenant, the Committee is concerned about the significant shortage of social housing in Belgium, especially in Flanders. The Committee is also concerned that larger families, as well as single-parent and low-income families, are at a disadvantage in qualifying for such social housing.

15. The Committee is deeply concerned that the State party has not established adequate mechanisms to ensure uniformity in the application of educational standards, including international norms on education, in all regions, owing to the fact that the regional governments have primary responsibility in the formulation of educational policy. The Committee also regrets that the delegation provided uneven information on the implementation of the right to education in the different regions.

16. The Committee notes with concern that, in 1998, Belgium devoted only 0.35 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to international cooperation, while the United Nations recommendation in this regard is 0.7 per cent of GDP for industrialized countries.

E. Suggestions and recommendations

17. The Committee recommends that, in the next periodic report, the State party provide more details on the mechanisms adopted to coordinate and ensure uniformity in activities by the various levels of government aimed at complying with international human rights obligations, in the light of article 28 of the Covenant.

18. The Committee urges the State party to formulate and adopt a comprehensive plan of action for human rights, as called for in paragraph 71 of the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action.

19. The Committee also urges the State party to establish an independent national human rights institution, in accordance with the Paris Principles of 1991.

20. The Committee recommends that the State party, having ratified the Covenant, take appropriate steps to guarantee fully the direct applicability of the Covenant in the domestic legal order.

21. The Committee recommends that the State party adopt measures to ensure that xenophobia, racism and activities of racist organizations, groups or political parties are outlawed, with a view to complying with the principle of non-discrimination, set forth in article 2.2 of the Covenant.

22. The Committee urges the State party to revise the "cohabitation rule" in the unemployment insurance regime, in order to eliminate its indirect discriminatory impact on women.

23. The Committee recommends that the State party undertake more active measures to address the inequality of employment between men and women and the discrepancy in wages between them, as well as to promote women's access to all levels of the labour market.

24. The Committee encourages the State party to combat unemployment among young people and the long-term unemployment of workers over the age of 45, through appropriate vocational and technical training. The Committee would welcome more information in the State party's next periodic report on the measures taken and on the results achieved.

25. The Committee urges the State party to take effective measures to combat paedophilia, child prostitution, child pornography and violence against children, and to seek international cooperation in this regard.

26. The Committee urgently requests more detailed information in the State party's next periodic report on the situation of social housing in Belgium, especially in Flanders. The Committee also recommends that the State party take measures to eliminate the disadvantage of larger families, as well as of single-parent and low-income families, in qualifying for such social housing.

27. The Committee recommends that the State party establish an adequate mechanism to monitor and ensure uniformity of educational standards, such as those arising from international legal obligations, throughout the country. In addition, the Committee would welcome information in its next periodic report that reflects adequately and in a balanced manner the situation of education in all regions and communities.

28. The Committee requests more information in the State party's next periodic report concerning the initiative introduced in September 1999 to assist Flemish secondary school students who are in conflict with the educational system and, if the initiative has proved successful, the Committee suggests that consideration be given to its introduction in all the regions.

29. The Committee looks forward to receiving information from the State party in its next periodic report on the enjoyment of the right to participate in and benefit from cultural life, such as access to cultural activities and cultural property, especially by disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society, persons with disabilities and older persons.

30. The Committee recommends that the State party review its budget allocation for international cooperation with a view to increasing its contribution, in accordance with the United Nations recommendation.

31. The Committee encourages the Government of Belgium, as a member of international organizations, in particular the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to do all it can to ensure that the policies and decisions of those organizations are in conformity with the obligations of States parties to the Covenant, in particular the obligations contained in article 2.1 concerning international assistance and cooperation.

32. The Committee requests the State party to include in its next periodic report information on how the State party has taken into consideration the suggestions and recommendations contained in the present concluding observations. The Committee looks forward to receiving the third periodic report of Belgium no later than 30 June 2005.

33. The Committee encourages the State party to disseminate widely the present concluding observations.